

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES TO WATCH

Allamakee Community School District

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Urbanicity: Rural

Location: Waukon, Iowa

Grades: K-12

21st CCLC Enrollment: 962

Percentage of All Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch: 46.43%

Demographics: Caucasian: 99.5%

Hours of 21st CCLC Program Operation:
Monday through Friday, before and after school

Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships Opportunity Conditions Addressed

Process Conditions:

Linked to Learning
Relational
Interactive

Organizational Conditions:

Systemic
Integrated
Sustained

Family Engagement in a K-12 Continuum

Family voice has always helped shape the 21st CCLC program for the Allamakee Community School District (ACSD). Families are involved in ACSD's programs in a variety of ways, whether through being interviewed for reflection and input, volunteering, helping to raise funds for a trip, or being a member of a parent advisory group. Families also have close connections through relationships with staff, as the "It takes a village" adage is reality for ACSD in rural Allamakee, Iowa. Most staff have worked in the program for many years and come from the community and know many of ACSD families. Ninety percent of ACSD families pick up their children at the end of each day. As a result, staff/family communication is daily.

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Family Engagement Adapted for Middle and High School Families

Family engagement takes a different form for elementary and middle school students than for high school students. Families of high school students do not often pick up their children, so family engagement is more focused on service learning opportunities and college and career readiness.

A differentiated approach to family engagement is nuanced and happens naturally based on students' development and families' concerns at different stages in school. For families whose children are in kindergarten, welcoming them into the 21st CCLC is a critical first step. It is even more important, program director Barbara Winters-Kelly describes, if parents did not have good school experiences when they were children. Throughout the year, there are parent-student advisory meetings for families with students in grades K-2. These families receive individual attention and staff are flexible and persistent in finding times that work for families.

For families with children in upper elementary and middle school, staff are often familiar with students and their families and have relationships they draw on to engage families. Family engagement for high school students can look very different. The main purpose of the high school program is to support students academically and to foster college and career readiness. The ACSD program invites guest speakers from a range of careers to present and speak with students and their families. These events are instrumental in helping students, many of them who will be first generation college students, imagine themselves in college. ACSD also leads college visits for parents and youth. Visiting a college with a group can help to demystify the process of applying to college. Helping families complete the FAFSA is also a benefit to families. "Parents are scared. They don't know how to fill the FAFSA out on their own, so we complete it with them and help calm their fears," says Winters-Kelly. Many adults in Allamakee County didn't go to college, so the importance of the ACSD program in supporting college readiness is especially significant. Site coordinators lead forums on hot careers locally, in Iowa, and nationwide. These forums are well attended and help students imagine a path after high school.

The Family Interview

The family interview is a popular family engagement strategy effective with families representing all age groups. Staff realized that pre- and post-surveys weren't generating substantive feedback and input from families for the 21st CCLC because families weren't differentiating between the regular school day and the 21st CCLC. Staff now implement individual family interviews that are conducted year round. These interviews are better for encouraging parent voice. Staff also create picture books and data books that include quotes from interviews and photos of students in the program. In the interviews, families share

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their thoughts about the program and ideas for reaching other families and community members. “We’ve taken 1,200 photos in the past three years. If a parent is working two jobs, they won’t be here that often. The pictures and photos are a way to keep them involved,” says Winters-Kelly. Program staff ask a family member—a parent, a grandparent, an older sibling—if they can take a picture of them, and then conduct a very brief interview. “We just ask them, how do you think this problem should be addressed? What do you want to see in this program?” says Winters-Kelly. This practice gives families voice and choice.

“If it weren’t for this program, my son would be failing. I’m a working mother of three children and don’t always have the time or knowledge to help all three children with their homework. Not only has this program helped my son’s grades, but his self-esteem. The staff are a great asset to have. They are courteous and helpful and very respectful towards the kids and parents. If I need anything all I have to do is ask.”— ACSD parent

TIPS FOR PROMISING PRACTICES

- **Design and target college and career readiness efforts for families and students.**
 - o Make learning about college exploration and career possibilities accessible to families. Demystify the college application process for families by going through what to expect step by step.
- **Invite community members who are first generation college students to present to families and students.**
 - o Especially in communities where most adults didn’t attend college, providing examples of community members who are college graduates can be a game changer for some students and families.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **When trying new family engagement strategies, be content with small increments of growth.** It can take time to reach more families and gain more significant outcomes. It’s okay to start small.

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